

## Imagining the future: Social struggles, the post-national domain and major contemporary social transformations

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# Imagining the future: Social struggles, the post- national domain and major contemporary social transformations

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## Abstract

The question this article seeks to answer is what are the major social transformations going on in contemporary society that will shape the future? The argument is that the analysis of the future requires a clearer perspective on social struggles and major social transformations in societal structures including structures of consciousness. The future is thus both actuality and possibility; it is of the present but also beckons beyond the present. Or, in the terms of Koselleck (2004 [1976/1979]), it opens up the space of expectations beyond the horizons of the present. The radical uncertainty of the future has opened it up to imaginary significations of all kinds. Yet many such projections of the future lack a normative orientation and also do not provide a satisfactory connection with actuality, namely the world as it exists. This is to the detriment of a perspective on possibility. The future is created in moments of transformation when radically new interpretations of the present take root. The article discusses the fate of the post-national domain in the context of societal struggles in which new visions of the future are created and which play out in three major social transformations of the present. The argument in this article places more emphasis on a normative conception of a cosmopolitan future that identifies links between the social and the ecological as well as widening the notion of justice to include a broader sphere of issues than those that have traditionally been the concern of the left.

## Keywords

capitalism, cosmopolitanism, ecology, the future, left and right, the post-national, social imaginaries, social movements, social struggles, social transformation

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An interesting question for sociological analysis which has rarely been satisfactorily addressed is how future societies should be imagined. Perhaps the question of future societies has been seen as an un-sociological problem, since sociology, like all of social science, deals with the social world as it exists and how it came to be what it is. The future, however, is uncertain beyond what can be known on the basis of current trends. Thus, the dominant approach to the future in social science is predictive analysis.<sup>1</sup> The limitations – as well as the advantages – of this mode of knowledge have been much discussed in the philosophy of social science and alternative epistemologies have been proposed that offer more critical and interpretative approaches to future possibility that are not based on probabilistic assessments of what might happen as a result of current risks. To these prognoses belong normative conceptions of the future, as in the notion of the post-national or cosmopolitan futures. However, as will be argued in this article, these approaches offer a limited view of the future, which requires a clearer perspective on social struggles and major social transformations in societal structures (see also Mota and Wagner, 2019).

It is now widely recognized that the future is not disconnected from the present but is a product of the present. At least within sociology, unlike normative political theory, such normative approaches to the future require an engagement with actuality. The capacity to imagine the future is part of the very fabric of human societies and resides in the capacities of social actors to interpret the social world. This has been widely recognized by a variety of very different philosophies of the imaginary.<sup>2</sup> The capacity for thinking about the future may also have an evolutionary basis in human cognition.<sup>3</sup> With modernity, the orientation to the future is all the more strong, as reflected in utopianism and radical political movements heralding a new age. Pre-modern societies were considerably more rooted in the past than modern societies, which sought to shape the present according to their vision of the future. Imagined futures are integral to the cultural models of modern society and are also central to the dynamics of capitalism. This is because of a fundamental shift in the perception of the future from certainty to uncertainty. The notion of the future as risk, for instance as in the writings of Ulrich Beck, introduced an interpretative dimension to the future in that risks require interpretation as they are not objective and real in ways that can be calculated by objective measurements (Beck, 1992).

However, social interpretation, as in the critical theory tradition, has a wider compass and includes learning capacities and re-interpretations of self-understanding. John Urry's late work, *What is the Future?* (2016), while influenced by Beck, offers an additional perspective in that the future is radically unknowable and irreducible to risks. Societies are complex systems and the future is not just an extension of the present. Social futures are contested, varied and uncertain. Such systems are also fragile and characterized by innovation, unpredictability and possible reversal (Urry, 2016: 188).<sup>4</sup> Complexity-driven futures is an alternative form of future thinking based on the individualistic model of human action, but it is also an alternative to conventional approaches based on the relatively fixed and enduring economic and social structures that characterize the present.

The perception of the uncertainty of the future has also been a key factor in capitalist dynamics, making innovation possible for instance, as Beckert (2016) has shown (see also Beckert and Bronk, 2018). The seeds of the future are contained within the critical moments of present time. The future is thus both actuality and possibility; it is of the

present but also beckons beyond the present. The radical uncertainty of the future has opened it up to imaginary significations of all kinds. Many such projections of the future lack a normative orientation and also do not provide a satisfactory connection with actuality, namely the world as it exists. This is to the detriment of a perspective on possibility. Such a perspective requires a strong focus on crises as the turning points of historical change, the points where the tracks of historical time can suddenly switch creating new historical paths. It may be suggested that the future is created in such moments of transformation when radically new interpretations of the present take root. For this to be a valid perspective, it makes sense to talk about major social transformations only if this includes a transformation of societal structures, including structures of consciousness, and how to discern signs of something new.

In this article, I argue that a key sociological dimension of imagined futures is precisely such processes of structural transformation, which include normative, cognitive, symbolic and aesthetic dimensions. It is therefore necessary to have a more thorough understanding of what it means to speak of a major social transformation. The specific question this article seeks to answer is the following: what are the major social transformations going on in contemporary society that will shape the future? This leads to a further question, namely what kind of social struggles underlie these transformations?

I begin with some further reflection on the category of the future as a basis for thinking about major social transformations. The article then offers an account of what I argue is the basis of a theory of social transformations, namely generative societal struggles in which new visions of the future are created. The third section discusses the three most salient social transformations of the present and how these play out in the current pandemic crisis.

## **When does the future begin?**

The concept of the future, notwithstanding its imaginary and interpretative dimensions, is foremost a temporal category. Luhmann (1976) emphasized the future as a rupture from the present. The modern concept of the future entails a rupture from the past and becomes an 'open future'. The future is experienced as a horizon of possibilities that disappear as we approach them. This immediately raises the time frame for thinking about the future. When does it begin? Has it already started? Is there no future? Assuming the present refers to the post-1945 period and extends to *c* 2050, a heuristic view of the future in temporal terms would see it as the world from the second half of this century, that is, from 2050. Why? There are two general sociological points to consider when looking at major societal transformation in a given time frame.

First, it is a question of rupture versus continuity. It is in part a question of how much weight we should give to rupture. Will the future be fundamentally different from the present or will there be considerable continuity? Second, if rupture is the critical matter, as I think it must be, it is also then a question of rupture from the past as well. In other words, the problem of rupture raises the question of whether the present (say, 2020) is fundamentally different from the past (say, from the pre-1945 period). So, the point of rupture has already happened, according to the idea of the Anthropocene, as generally

understood as having commenced after the great caesura of 1945. If this is the case, then the future seen as unfolding over the next three decades to mid-century will probably not be much different from the present day.

A way to address the question is to say there are three possibilities or scenarios for looking at the future: transition, collapse/breakdown, and transformation.

The notion of transition suggests that the future will be structurally different from that which has gone before. One common way of thinking in such terms is the optimistic scenario of a transition to a post-capitalist future, possibly enabled by new kinds of technology that will emancipate people from oppressive work and exploitation (Mason, 2016). The vision of radical political ecology for a transformation in the relation between the social and the natural worlds also captures the utopian notion of a transition to a different and better world. The idea of the post-national has also been mostly cast in such terms of transition to a world in which the nation-state has vanished or is much diminished.

The second scenario for thinking about the future is the pessimistic vision of a collapse of societal systems. There is clearly some basis for this: global warming probably will increase by 2 degrees in 30 years based on current trends (by end of the century maybe 4 degrees but probably not more). World population will increase from 7.6 billion to 9.8 billion. But it is doubtful that these trends in themselves, at least by mid-century, will lead to global catastrophe in the sense of planetary destruction. There have been many historical examples of societal collapse but they are non-global (see Diamond, 2011; Tainter, 1988; Wallace-Wells, 2019).

The third scenario is what I claim is the more realistic likelihood of a transformation of current developments, but neither transition to a new kind of society nor the total collapse of human societies. To imagine the future, we therefore need to pay closer attention to the nature and dynamics of current social transformations of societal structures.

However, the issue of temporality will not go away. We also need a longer time frame to consider seriously the future beyond the present. While I think our time is very different from the modern era up till 1945, if we take the end of the Second World War as a watershed in the history of modern societies, then probably the next 30 years will not be much different from now, but things look very different if we take the end of the 21st century as our frame. In such a perspective, the old ways of viewing the future will be invalidated by planetary changes.

So, if we take a longer view of the future (to the end of the 21st century), I think it becomes clear that humans do not have a capacity to destroy the Earth, but they certainly have a capacity to make many societies unsustainable. It might be qualified that there is no one single future but multiple ones, which, if true, affirms the prognosis of transformation along different trajectories rather than transition or collapse. So, worst case scenarios are likely to be regionally specific. For now, much of Europe is probably not going to suffer the worst, but if we look further into the future the prospects are not good if global warming melts the polar ice caps and shuts down the Gulf Stream that is responsible for the temperate climate in north-western Europe. In that scenario, which recalls Byron's poem in 1816, 'Darkness', Europe may witness not immigration but emigration for the first time since the early 20th century.<sup>5</sup> Large parts of the world, already ravaged by mega fires and subject to devastating droughts, may become uninhabitable by the end of the century.

The argument, then, is against the temptations of catastrophism and the naivety of too much optimism as things will continue more or less the same with some disruption for the future present. There are prospects for human agency to shape the world. So, my argument is one of optimism tinged with realism or put differently: pessimism with hope. This is where the notion of major social transformation becomes crucial to any consideration of the future. It is firmly based on social agency and how the present time interprets itself. Only by anchoring future possibility in the present is it possible to bridge the gap between actuality and potentiality. The future is in many ways a product of the present (see Adams and Groves, 2007).

Contemporary sociological theory lacks a developed theory of social transformation, which indicates something greater than social change and having normative significance. The concept is not unrelated to the older notion of revolution, but is not confined to the violent uprising of the masses, a notion that is less relevant to contemporary societies. Other conceptualizations are necessary. Roy Bhaskar's 'Transformational model of social activity' is one famous conception of transformation that affirms the capacity of social actors to bring about the transformation of social reality (Bhaskar, 1979). Social reality is made up of social structures, which are products of social action that have taken on the form of structures but can in turn be transformed by agency. But like many other accounts, Bhaskar's is very unclear on specific kinds of social transformation. Habermas's theory of communicative action is another approach that affirms the centrality of social action to bring about a transformation in the systemic structures of societies. As with Alain Touraine, his social theory asserted the centrality of social movements as the agents of societal transformation (Touraine, 1977, 1981). Touraine emphasized the place of cultural models in social movements in opening up alternative visions of social possibility. Habermas's work put a strong emphasis on the normative and cognitive expansion of human reason in the confrontation with power. Honneth's revision of critical theory is also in this vein of struggle against domination, but he sees struggles of recognition as the primary forms of social transformation (Honneth, 1996). The concept of social transformation has a reduced significance for Bourdieu, who was primarily concerned with the reproduction of forms of domination and the centralization of state power.<sup>6</sup> In Foucault, as in much of postmodern thought, social transformation is not a primary concern, given the concern with the analysis of power and scepticism about normative futures and collective struggles.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full assessment of the idea of social transformation in social theory, let alone an alternative theory. To undertake this task it would be necessary to revisit the classical sociological tradition constructed as a diagnosis of the times (from Weber to the Frankfurt School and beyond). This is not the place to do this. It can be commented that the idea of social transformation in this tradition on the whole was confined to a negative view of capitalist modernization that led to the loss of a progressive conception of the future as rooted in the potentialities of the present. The article seeks to offer an account of some of the elements of such a diagnosis of the times by looking at the dynamics of major social transformation and the related future imaginaries. Following a widely accepted approach in critical theory, social transformation is related to social struggles. Inspired by William Sewell's theory of the French Revolution, I see it as also entailing a 'transformation in structure', as opposed to a more general

notion of social change.<sup>7</sup> Structures of meanings and their transformation are, according to Sewell, strongly linked to symbolic and emotional experiences that lead to the creation of new structures of cultural frameworks. The next section provides an analysis of social struggles that are generative of major social transformations in that they open up new fields of possibility beyond the present.

## **Societal struggles and future imaginaries in contemporary societies**

To begin, a double analytical distinction needs to be made on the basic elements of societal conflict in modern societies. The first is to distinguish the polarity of radical versus conservative (or affirmative) movements. While these are generally related to left and right, a broader and more generic distinction is needed, since, as is becoming increasingly clear, left and right no longer capture what is at stake in many political conflicts. The right (the neoliberal right and now the alt-right),<sup>8</sup> for example, has increasingly become the main carrier of radical programmes and the left is often forced into more conservative positions. Ecological politics is a further complication of these lines, embodying both conservative and radical dimensions. As one would expect, many left and right movements embody both elements of the analytical distinction. For these reasons, the radical versus conservative distinction is more useful than left and right as generic terms to understand social transformations in societal structures. This is not to suggest that the left has lost the capacity for radical programmes (the recent wave of anti-capitalist protests, Extinction Rebellion, and the Black Lives Matter movement [BLM] are testimony to the continued vitality of radical politics).

Second, a distinction needs to be made between social movements and political movements. The latter are of a more specific nature and do not necessarily entail a wider transformation of society. The distinguishing feature of a social movement is that it contains a vision of society that can be described as a cultural model which includes a social imaginary. The difference between both can be related to Karl Mannheim's famous distinction between utopia and ideology (Mannheim, 1936). Social movements articulate the impulse towards utopia while political movements are more likely to be based on an ideology. The latter are more common but either can transform into the other. A political movement can become scaled up to a social movement (as for example the environmental movement) while a social movement may become institutionalized into a political movement (as, for example, becoming associated with a political party). The term 'social movement' is best confined to movements that are agents of major social transformations and irreducible to particular organizations. In spatial and temporal terms, social movements are more expansive than political movements, which are confined to more specific issues, and entail an imaginary signification. In this article, I am mostly concerned with social movements, which can also be related more generally to the 'great transformations' of modernity. However, I do not think that many of the historical examples are helpful, since these are generally based on the idea of a transition from one type of society to another, as in the Marxist historiography on the transition from feudalism to capitalism or, as mentioned, some notion of a revolutionary uprising that leads to a new social and political order.<sup>9</sup> Following Touraine, modernity can be seen as shaped by a



dominant social movement; while specific movements have always changed, there has always been a dominant social movement that spear-headed societal transformation (Touraine, 1977). While Touraine clearly had radical progressive movements in mind, one also needs to consider affirmative or conservative ones.

On this basis, we can distinguish four key social struggles that have shaped contemporary societies since the post-1945 period. I see these less as political cleavages than social struggles that encompass the elements previously discussed and are generative of structural change, including structures of consciousness. They do, however, embody much of the form of a cleavage in that they have a pronounced political form that is related to a social division. However, these societal struggles are not easily reduced to forms of social stratification that map on to electoral blocs, as in the classic definition of a political cleavage in political science (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Indeed, many political movements also do not map onto the classic lines of a political cleavage; such cleavages traditionally concern mass support for the major political parties but do not entail fundamental societal transformation. In recent years political scientists have drawn attention to changes in the old political cleavages in Western societies as a result of globalization. Most notably Kriesi et al. (2008, 2012) have documented a clear shift away from the old left versus right cleavage as a range of new issues, most notably immigration, have come to dominate the political agenda (see also Bornschier, 2018). However, with a view to a perspective on major social transformation and future imaginaries, I argue that a broader perspective is needed. This is especially so in view of the fact that the new conflicts go beyond the model of a political cleavage. To this end, I argue for a framework that incorporates what I see as four central social struggles that have shaped most Western societies in the post-1945 period and which are likely to extend into the near future. The analysis is based on the historical experience of 'Western' societies, but I do not see this as ethnocentric in that the struggles discussed here can have different temporalities. Indeed, I would like to claim the four struggles are not sequential.

The first, on which we need not dwell too long, is the now familiar conflict between labour and capital, which derived from the historical struggles of the 19th century. In this conflict, which shaped the main political cleavage in many societies for much of the 20th century, the social question generated the dominant imaginary of a future society based on social justice. The main protagonists were what can now be called the old left versus the right, which we can also now term old conservatism. Since the late 1970s, the dominance of this conflict has dwindled both as a political movement and especially as a social movement, due to the displacement of the social basis of the old left as a result of post-industrialization and the emergence of a new field of political contestation. However, the liberal script on which old conservatism sustained itself also underwent change, leading to a more complicated range of positions on the right. For a time, the imaginary of liberal democracy offered an alternative imaginary to that of the old left. The revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989/90 at first gave substance to the myth of the 'end of history', until the dream turned into a nightmare. In any case, we have with the first fissure, a fundamental conflict between left and right around two different imaginaries: social justice versus liberal democracy. The former nurtured egalitarianism while the latter fostered individualism. These imaginaries have not vanished – the struggle for social justice is still very much alive – but they have entered into new domains and with very different scripts.



The second societal conflict took shape with the rise of new social movements in the 1970s. By the 1980s these movements, at least within Western societies, had a significant impact on the old left and on society more generally (see, for example, Dalton and Kuechler, 1990; Johnson and Klandermaans, 1995). Thus began the conflict between the new left versus the new right. The old left, with its focus on the social question (class and equality), was challenged by a range of new and more cultural questions that were predominantly a product as well as a generator of cultural pluralism. Women and the middle class figured more strongly in these new movements, which were also concerned with the quality of life, identity and post-material values (Inglehart, 1977). At the core of the new left was the imaginary of personal and collective autonomy. Cultural questions replaced or – as in the debate around recognition and distribution reveals – at least considerably complicated the older social questions around class (see Fraser and Honneth, 2004). On the other side of the political spectrum was the new right that emerged with the emergence of neoliberalism and new technocratic elites.<sup>10</sup> This was of course a continuation of old conservatism, but in ways that often blurred the distinction between right and left, as in Third Way-style politicians of the left, such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, who accepted much of the cultural politics of the new left. However, the new right, as reflected in mainstream neoliberalism, was initially more allied to the traditional right in economic and social politics. The new right itself was pulled in different directions: the reactionary neo-conservative right (as represented by Thatcher and Reagan) and its more socially liberal embodiments (for example, the CDU in Germany), to which we can add its progressive representatives (in cultural issues), as in Third Way politics. The new right, in all its manifestations, was united by the imaginary of the market and the vision of a new global age based on technocratic politics and the expanding horizon of the market.

It thus came about that, by the 1990s, the relatively sharp conflict between radicals and conservatives was diluted leading to different expressions of radical and conservative politics. Two kinds of radicals clashed, for the new right was itself a radical movement, even when defending traditional values: neoliberal elites and technocratic elites versus the new elites that emerged with the new left. Many neoliberals took on board the politics of cultural pluralism, including human rights, while much of the new left was not primarily driven by the old class politics but by what Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) described as a cultural critique of capitalism. In this new conflict, in which feminism, human rights and environmentalism took central stage, the unity of the left was lost and a space was created for the gestation of neo-nationalism, for the two sides shared a basic belief in the prospects of globalization to deliver a better world but without having to address the problem of equality.

From the late 1990s, it became clear that a third societal conflict was emerging, adding to the now complicated internal transformation of left and right. This can be characterized as the conflict between cosmopolitanism and neo-nationalism. This emerging discord did not become pivotal until after the 2008 financial crash, but over the preceding ten years or so it was in gestation. Indeed, since the 1990s, with the rise and expansion of electronic communication and global communications and trade, the discord could easily be seen within the previously described conflict of the new left and new right in that cosmopolitans were clearly products of the new left in their politics and in their milieus, which were compatible with cultural pluralism and post-materialism.

Cosmopolitanism embraced the imaginary of individual and collective autonomy, which was part of the promise of a more globally connected world, which can be said to be a new global imaginary (Stegers, 2008). Nationalism, on the other side of the coin, was not a potent force in the 1990s, with the obvious exception of the Balkans, and could be seen, for the greater part, in terms of the affirmative politics of the more neo-conservative elements of the new right. The barbarism of the war in Bosnia and Kosovo provoked a call for a more cosmopolitan world that otherwise seemed to be viable in the mid-1990s.

This narrative has to be revised in light of the events that have followed in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, when a nativist reaction occurred against cosmopolitanism as well as the so-called establishment, which includes both the right and left. The conflict between cosmopolitanism and nationalism cannot be seen within the contours of the new right and new left. It is now increasingly clear that cosmopolitanism is not only a politics of the new left but is also very attractive to the progressive elements within new right. Nationalism, too, cuts across both left and right, as the examples of Brexit and Trump show. Although primarily a right-wing political movement, Brexit gained considerable support from working-class voters who previously supported the left. In light of the rise of neo-authoritarianism – Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump, Brexit, Modi in India, Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary – nationalism cannot be seen as incidental but a major counter-vailing current in many parts of the world. While recent literature often contrasts (right-wing) radical populism with liberal democracy, this leads to the mistaken view that the former is the contrary to democracy when in fact it has mostly been produced by democratic systems. In my view, it is best contrasted to cosmopolitanism, not least since this is the main rival of right-wing populism, which, in contrast, defends and defines itself as the protector of the nation against the dangers of the global world and the cosmopolitan elites.

Since 2016, with the election of Trump and the Brexit referendum in the UK, there has been a near total re-alignment of the right around neo-authoritarian nationalism (see also Brown, 2019). In the analysis offered here, this brings to the fore a different struggle from that of the new left and the new right since it rejects the imaginary of a global world and the politics of autonomy other than a limited notion of rights. Many elements within the progressive new right are in opposition to the current surge of neo-authoritarianism within liberal democracies, but do not otherwise share the imaginary of the new left. Consequently they reconcile themselves, if not ally themselves, with the neo-authoritarian right. As argued, the remnants of the old left, in many cases, have also embraced nationalism, to their detriment as in the case of the hapless British Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Indeed, neo-authoritarian nationalism has become a radical force in the world, even as its claims to be affirmative of the nation. Now, while it could be argued the rise of neo-nationalism/authoritarian nationalism (Trump, Johnson, etc.) reflects the collapse of both the right and the left, the former has for the greater part re-aligned itself in a way the latter has not (an exception is the phenomenon of Bolsonaro in Brazil where both the left and right imploded).

While cosmopolitanism, when it became a potent force in the world from the mid-1990s, offered a clear vision of bright future, neo-authoritarian nationalism has no such vision. Today, cosmopolitanism, in its older guise at least, has lost its zeal and capacity to bring about major social transformation. There are some signs that neo-authoritarian nationalism, with the support of the alt-right, Putin and radical libertarians,<sup>11</sup> is instead

becoming a global force, though the nature of this alliance is such that it lacks a capacity to articulate a global imaginary. However, there is another way to look at the situation.

It is now becoming clear that we can speak of a fourth societal conflict and in which cosmopolitanism regained may have a new life and capacity to articulate a future imaginary. Climate politics is now emerging as a major political force, but so is resistance to it. It is possible to see signs of a new societal conflict emerging around climate politics with, on one side of the spectrum, what can be characterized as eco-politics, to refer to progressive climate politics, of the Anthropocene, and, on the other, a re-aligned neo-right, supported by the forces of unsustainability, including climate change denial, and the alt-right. Climate politics today has gone beyond the concerns of environmentalism in that it is not ancillary to mainstream politics but is now increasingly becoming one of the central challenges of politics in the era of the Anthropocene and attracting considerable public support since the Paris Agreement signed in 2016 (see Latour, 2017). Contemporary eco-politics is thus no longer confined to the limits of an oppositional political movement. Although environmental movements which operate on the level of political movements are major agents of political contestation, there are some signs of eco-politics taking on the character of a social movement in that what is at stake is increasingly seen to be the sustainability of human society itself. Since the Paris Agreement there is now a global climate regime that demonstrates a degree of reflexivity as well as universality (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019: 40).

One of the main expressions of eco-politics is calls for policies of sustainability, though in many accounts sustainability is inadequate as a response to the current scale of environmental destruction, since it is often simply the attempt to sustain what has come to be unsustainable. Eco-politics can in part be seen as an expression of cosmopolitanism, but goes beyond it in bringing to the forefront of the political a new and different imaginary that cannot be seen only in terms of an appeal to the global world against the closed horizons of the nation. It is rather one that seeks to create a sustainable relation of the social world to the Earth. Neither the national community nor the global community offer a solution to the problems that can be associated with the Anthropocene. Eco-politics seeks instead another and more far-reaching goal: to re-orient the relation of the social world to the planetary scale of the Earth. In doing so, it meets the resistance of what we can call the neo-right, which includes the neoliberal right and the reactionary neo-conservative right for whom eco-politics is a challenge to the status quo in ways that go far beyond all other radical movements. In this respect, a re-alignment of the right can be seen in the alliance of climate change denial, neo-authoritarianism and neoliberalism, as reflected in the supporters of the Trump presidency. For this reason, the central societal conflict today is not cosmopolitanism versus nationalism, but the Earth-based eco-politics and the politics of unsustainability of the neo-right.

The foregoing reconstruction of the most consequential societal struggles of recent times in the West aims to identify the most important forces of social transformation in the Western world today and which are likely to shape the future beyond the next thirty years. I have argued that these are more than political cleavages; while having much of the character of social and political cleavages, they are of a wider nature and are generative of social transformation in that they bring about a fundamental transformation in the political and cultural structures of society leading to durable change. In this sense,

one can see the formation of a social movement and a normative vision of the future. The four societal struggles discussed, while being chronological in terms of their emergence in Western societies, are overlapping in that they act upon each other and, as a result, undergo mutual transformation. They are also not necessarily successive in that in much of the non-Western world these struggles unfolded through different trajectories (Mota and Wagner, 2019). In this way, radical and affirmative movements have undergone internal transformation, as the history of left and right attests. Thus, for example, the BLM movement has now, with the Covid-19 crisis, emerged as a potentially major movement that brings to the fore human rights and social justice. Finally, it is to be noted that all these conflicts are products of social interpretation in which collective learning plays a role in determining how people respond to the objective situation. The mechanisms and processes by which this occurs go beyond the imaginaries of the movements in question.

### **In the ruins of the post-national domain: divided societies and the end of times**

Until now, the notion of the post-national has been predominantly conceived in terms of the relationship of the global world to the local, including the national space. Globalization has allegedly undermined the integrative capacities of national societies and diminished the nation-state as the source of sovereignty. From the perspective of the present day, this picture of the post-national is in need of considerable revision, less for its accuracy than for the implications that might follow for the future. The national domain has not been superseded, even if it has been diminished by global forces. The worldwide response to the Covid-19 pandemic shows that the state has a powerful capacity to shut down whole societies. The example of China and the Belt and Road initiative shows a potentially new state-driven globalization. But it is evident that while there are now new spaces between and beyond national societies, the post-national does not reside in some non-national domain. The national domain still exists, even if it is in ruins, as one of the main containers of social institutions and much of the world is still organized around nation-states. Yet nation-states have lost their capacity to secure both social and systemic integration. National societies are now more divided than ever before. In this situation, which is due less to the failure of the nation-state than the failure of globalization to deliver a better world, cosmopolitanism on its own does not offer a solution. Indeed, it may be part of the problem in that cosmopolitanism has generally failed to adequately address two of the most urgent problems of the present day: the social question and the ecological question.

The previous reconstruction of societal conflicts points in the direction of contemporary societies as deeply divided, with common ground increasingly eroded if not entirely abandoned. The condition of crisis, fragmentation and contestation is probably more significant than the spectre of globalization as the reality of the post-national today. While the older conflict between left and right was largely contained within the horizons of nation-state, the latter three societal conflicts discussed are not constrained by national limitations but are forced to operate within the national space only without the prospect of the common good as a normative bond. Many societies are now more internally divided than externally divided. In other words, the differences *within* national societies

has become greater than the differences *between* national societies. The social conflicts discussed in the previous section increasingly question national parameters and extend the field of political contestation beyond national borders. This leads to reactions that affirm the national but in ways that intensify its disintegration. Nowhere is this process of fragmentation more clear than in the case of the new forms of authoritarian or radical right nationalism that have surfaced in many countries. In these cases nationalism has rebounded but without a nation. As a result of far-reaching cultural pluralization and social diversification, on the one side, and on the other growing social inequality and social discontent deriving from globalization, the national domain has lost its integrative powers. This comes at a time when the nation-state is also losing its capacity to provide systemic integration. The foundations upon which it was based, for example progressive taxation, life-long employment, liberal migration policies, no longer exist. This comes at a time when the desire for safety has a new urgency. As the Covid-19 crisis reveals, the state is forced to re-discover its primary function to protect the health of its population.

In this situation, social struggles open up the Pandora's box of the national domain to all kinds of movements, not all of which have any real capacity to clear a path to the future. One is the historical lineage of current visions and discourses of the end of times, which now includes the spectre of ecological catastrophe and pandemic infectious diseases. With the declining capacity of the ideas of modernity – progress, liberalism and socialism, etc. – the future is opened up to new and dark visions. The imagination of the future is more likely to be dystopian than utopian. Slavoj Žižek, in *Living in the End of Times* (2011) has identified the four signs of this coming apocalypse: the worldwide ecological crisis; imbalances within the economic system; the biogenetic revolution; and exploding social divisions and ruptures. An example of a sinister and dark vision of the future is in the writings of the British philosopher Nick Land on acceleration and the 'dark Enlightenment' replacing the progressive Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that there is now a huge cultural production of dystopian visions that take popular as well as intellectual forms (see Button, 2012; Horn, 2018; Killen and Libovic, 2014; Meiner and Veel, 2012; Recuber, 2016). It is easier to imagine the end of something than the creation of something new. This creates a space for fantasy. Perhaps a major factor in the current anxiety about the future is in fact uncertainty. The Covid-19 pandemic gives further animus to such anxieties, as Žižek (2020) has also commented in a recent book. This leads less to a vision of doom than numbness. It anesthetizes us. It inculcates a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. It also creates a kind of fear that leads to anxiety rather than to action. This is the psychological condition of chronophobia and the related phenomenon of climate anxiety.<sup>13</sup> The sense of slow time – a distant future – reinforces the feeling that it is not of the present.

It can lead to bizarre responses, such as anti-natalism, a view that there should be no more human beings, even the right not to be born.<sup>14</sup> It also leads to conspiracy theories, such as deep-state conspiracies, and other popular post-truth epistemologies, such as flat Earth theories.<sup>15</sup> An additional feature of 'end of times' thinking is a tendency in radical right-wing Christian populism in the USA to embrace extreme versions ecological catastrophe, in which destruction is a punishment for those who have not resisted the temptations of liberal modernity (see Ronan, 2017; Roser-Renouf et al., 2016). In such visions, the nation is not a universal category in which something like a common good transcends

the good and the bad. The idea of the nation as a common space has in effect been abandoned by large swathes of the radical right for whom there is no common future, just survival. This vision is common to the alt-right and the soothsayers of the Dark Enlightenment. In the USA today, for many of the more extreme evangelical followers of Trump, there is a strong sense of a demonic rage against liberal values. Older and also religious themes play out in a cultural battle between different social milieus and their worldviews. Essentially, there a closed vision and an open one, a conflict that is illustrated by the phenomena of Trump and Brexit, to take the two most virulent developments that encapsulate more general societal trends. Covid-19 intensifies these trends.

There are two colliding worldviews which play out around different ecological visions and visions of political community. Cultural conflict today is very much between a liberal worldview – the open horizon of a pluralist and cosmopolitan one – and the closed worldview of right-wing populism. This conflict is now also being played out through the prism of environmental catastrophe coupled with the pandemic health crisis. Issues of ecological sustainability are at the core of this. The liberal left embrace the cause of sustainability to preserve the status quo. In this respect, they also side with the neoliberal middle ground, who also support cultural pluralism. On the other side of what is now a major societal division, large swathes of the population reject the open vision of both the left and middle ground, and the need to rescue a common future. The politics of sustainability and health are indeed drawn into this vortex. I think this is the only way it is possible to explain popular post-truth epistemologies such as climate change denial, conspiracy theories and flat Earth theories in the USA, anti-vaccine movements, where such trends are more entrenched. In every sense, the future is now; it is not a time yet to come; and it is not for everyone. The post-national is now embroiled in the end-of-times thinking.

A qualification should be noted. While I think one can speak of two cultures colliding with each other, a more differentiated view of the social groups in question and, too, a clearer sense of the related social milieus is required. If we look at the support basis for Trump in the US and for Brexit in the UK, what we see is the intersection of diverse groups, not one homogeneous group. There is a wider sociological point here, namely that cultural orientations do not translate directly into social groups or personality types. So, for example, in the UK, Brexit has been supported by diverse groups, mainly the southern English lower middle class and the northern working class. Trump's support basis consists of more heterogeneous elements, ranging from the racist voter, the climate change denier, the evangelical voter who is satisfied by ultra-right-wing Supreme Court appointments, the National Rifle Association, the skilled working class hoping to get jobs back, the middle class seeking tax breaks, the traditional republican voter opposed to anything that resembles social democracy such as public health care, etc. It all ultimately depends on the stay-at-home voter and voter suppression. This is a volatile situation and one with many contradictions, and it is not necessarily held together by the end-of-time scenarios or the politics of rage and fury. These cultural orientations, including trends in popular culture and science fiction, both express and at the same time reinforce societal polarization.

Such currents also take the form of cultural militancy. The appeal of Brexit, for many, is precisely the desire to embrace catastrophe and pain (see O'Toole, 2018). If the worst can't be prevented, it can be embraced. This idea lies at the core of the Dark Enlightenment



which shares much with the alt-right movement. The very idea of catastrophe has entered into the *Zeitgeist*. This is not just a characteristic of the right but also of the far left: the idea that the march of socialism requires catastrophe before the promised land is reached. Hence the appeal of Brexit to the far left. However, there is no doubt that today it is the right that has embraced radical revolution, which is nurtured by social discontent. But let us not forget that the neo-right movement, in combating the new global climate regime, is led by opportunistic neoliberals for whom catastrophe presents a new order of governance, emergency governance, which may soon be complemented with climate emergencies.<sup>16</sup> The Amazon, the oceans, the polar caps, the glaciers of the Himalayas, and endangered species have been abandoned by global elites, who, unlike elites of earlier times, are not interested in the future.

For those with no hope for the future, the vision of a sustainable world has nothing to offer them. Their lives will continue to suffer from unsustainable systems (in health care, urban infrastructure, pensions, etc.). So better deny these to those who may benefit from them. Just consider San Francisco, an exemplary city for urban sustainable policies and cosmopolitan pluralism but with extreme social exclusion and homelessness. The Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017 also reveals this discord at the centre of global cities. Sustainability and unsustainability coexist in a world characterized by extreme and growing social inequality.

This is what produces the social resentment that expresses itself in demonized forms and which lends support to a wider culture of authoritarianism, which has swept into many parts of the world, both in the northern and southern hemispheres. If anything unites the radical right it is authoritarianism in its cultural forms (and which is compatible with opposition to political authoritarianism). Thus, anti-lockdown protests, especially in the USA, by the radical right go hand in hand with opposition to China in the name of freedom from tyranny (where essentially the state presents tyranny). However, from a sociological perspective, what is always crucial is not one specific cultural orientation but the combination of different elements and orientations. Much of the current discussion on Brexit, Trump and related events and movements in other countries – Bolsonaro, a Brazilian version of Trump – focuses on populism. Some of this literature offers important perspectives on what are undoubtedly right-wing populist movements, which, while differing greatly have much in common (for example, anti-elite/anti-establishment, anti-migration, nationalistic and xenophobic, etc.). Clearly, Trumpism and Brexit are highly complicated phenomena and can be better explained by recourse to several causes coming together, rather than by reference to cultural narratives alone. Nonetheless, the subversion of the liberal script and the abandonment of belief in the nation and planet as a shared place is a clear and distinct marker of current times where the post-national is anything but cosmopolitan.

## Major social transformations

The declining prospects of cosmopolitanism in face of the obvious rise of anti-cosmopolitan trends and the objective reality of climate change in the new context of the Anthropocene requires a fundamental revision of the political legacy of modernity. The natural environment can no longer be ignored or seen as a marginal to other conceptions



of the political. The concerns of older social struggles now need to be filtered through the prism of the Anthropocene, which is no longer a geological term but a key category of societal interpretation. The social question concerning equality is not one that can be posed without taking into account issues of sustainability. The politics of the old left as well as those of the new left have to face the challenges of eco-politics. Questions of social equality are inseparable from the sustainability of natural resources. The presuppositions of some of the older social struggles need to be questioned in light of the Anthropocene, which reveals the contradiction between the belief in the infinity of growth and the finite resources of the Earth to sustain growth. The problem of social justice, for instance, cannot be solved satisfactorily in Western countries if it requires continued unsustainable growth that produces social injustice in other parts of the world that are locked into the global system of production and consumption. These contradictions lie at the core of social struggles today. Another major contradiction that has become more important today lies in the technological foundations of society. New kinds of electronic technology have created the conditions for considerable human emancipation, but they have also created new kinds of domination. Individual and collective autonomy is both enhanced and underpinned by digital technology which enables political community to emerge, but also makes possible new kinds of technocratic power that go beyond anything previously imagined.

The following proposal places contradictions at the centre of the analysis of major social transformations. It is possible to identify three major contradictions at the core of contemporary society: capitalism and democracy; technocratic power and political community; growth and sustainability. Until recently, modern societies achieved a balance in these countervailing forces that provided modernity with its most basic animus. Today the capacity for contemporary societies to strike a balance between these forces is weakened, and as a result, the scale of problems and societal crises increases to a point that the sustainability of society is now in question. However, despite the temptations of catastrophism, this situation creates new spaces for social struggles and opens up avenues for major social transformation to occur. A necessarily brief characterization of these new openings of the post-national domain can be given.

*Capitalism and democracy.* The relation between both has been one of tension in that they are based on different and opposing logics: inequality and equality; the market and political community. The 'Great Transformation', as described by Polanyi, once it had taken place led, through a 'double movement', to demands for social protection against the expansion of the market (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Class conflict in Western societies since 1945 has in general been towards an accommodation of both. Capitalism has had to be constrained to meet the demands of democratization; while democracy has had to make compromises. The resulting balance, leading to what has been referred to as democratic capitalism, has been fraught with problems of legitimation (Habermas, 1975). To sum up a complicated story, this balance between capitalism and democracy has now broken down to a point that it does not seem possible to restore it through the mechanisms of class compromise and liberal democracy (Azmanova, 2020; Streeck, 2014). The decoupling of capitalism and democracy opens the ground for a different relationship, which can be one that asserts the ascendancy of one over the other. This is now one of the most important social transformations of the present. In the non-Western world,

the relation takes an even more intensified form in view of the fact democratic capitalism was already largely absent. This is strikingly the case in China, where human rights and democracy are severely curtailed by a societal model that unfetters capitalism from the restraints of democracy.

*Technocratic power and political community.* One of the features of modernity was the strong assertion of individual and collective autonomy as the basis of political community. While the main conflict that this led to was with capitalism, it is evident that, in recent times, as recognized by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, technology has become a new source of domination (Feenberg, 1991). This cannot be entirely explained by reference to capitalism, even if some of the major sources of technocratic power are capitalistic corporations. Digital domination in the new era of algorithmic governance and ‘surveillance capitalism’ is now a major challenge to democracy and to personal autonomy (Berns and Rouvroy, 2013; Bridle, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). On the other side, the pursuit of autonomy cannot, without regression, return to an earlier age when technology was not in itself a major source of domination. Progress in many spheres of life – in health and medicine, communications, the production of food – has been possible because of technology. Technology is no longer only a means to achieve ends, but in becoming an end in itself it has led to the creation of dependencies that are not guided by normative goals. This contradiction between technology as a means and as an end is not easily resolved, but could be said to be the basis of one of the major social transformations of the present. This question of technological mastery – the mastery of technology for normative goals – constitutes one of the major social transformations of the present and is closely related to the previously discussed relation of democracy and capitalism, but it is also central to the ecological challenge.

*Growth and sustainability.* The notion of the Anthropocene reveals a further dimension to social transformation. Until now, the natural environment was seen as lying outside the social world, which, in the formation of modernity, had emancipated itself from nature. Whatever balance was achieved between the social world and the natural world has now broken down. The latter no longer constitutes the stable ground on which human societies can exist. The destruction of the natural environment by modern societies, above all since the Great Acceleration<sup>17</sup> in the post-1945 period, has led to a new situation in which the social and the natural have become de-coupled to the detriment of both. The older struggles operated on the assumption of a relation to nature that is no longer valid. The new struggles between eco-politics and the neo-right take place on this ground, the new post-national space of the Anthropocene. The latter seek to maintain the status quo through measures such as emergency and disaster governance, geo-engineering, the advocacy of resilience, securitization. Whether or not eco-politics will succeed in opening up a different path remains to be seen, but this struggle has already become a major social transformations of the present. The current Covid-19 pandemic makes this struggle all the more critical in that it intensifies existing struggles and crises: the need for growth versus the need for social protection; liberty versus safety; the contradiction between the belief in the infinity of growth and the finite resources of the Earth to sustain it. It is however clear that the politics of sustainability must now include a relation to health. The pandemic has shown that the propensity created by turbo-driven capitalism not only to destroy the

natural environment but in doing so to create new risks – the global release of catastrophic viruses – endangers humanity at precisely the moment when humanity is already destroying the environment.

## Conclusion

The post-national domain does not reside in global society or some kind of global order above and beyond national societies, but takes shape in the ruins of nations and in the social struggles that emerge in the interstices. A tendency in much of the literature on cosmopolitanism is to see it as a reality and that, by virtue of necessity, it will lead to a more cosmopolitan future. The premise of widespread cosmopolitanism does not lead to a more cosmopolitan societies. The reverse can happen, as is evident from many developments today in societies that, until recently, were regarded as cosmopolitan, for example, the USA and the UK. Any account of cosmopolitan trends will need to consider anti-cosmopolitanism. A feature of the current situation is that the post-national domain is a zone of contestation between, among other struggles, cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan struggles. In the account offered here, I have stressed the re-alignment of the right around neo-authoritarian nationalism, a narrow conception of rights, and climate change denial. Cosmopolitan trends will continue but are likely to be frustrated by other forces. In this account, then, the post-national domain is not necessarily cosmopolitan. However, the anti-cosmopolitan forces are unable to resuscitate the nation, which has now become the site of a politics of closure. The Covid-19 pandemic confirms this trend.

Yet, there is no total system of domination. Capitalism and the rise of new kinds of technocratic power do not obliterate alternatives. The major social transformations of the present are not singular paths or predetermined but involve significant struggles, the outcomes of which will shape the future. The argument offered in this article places more emphasis on a normative conception of a cosmopolitan future that identifies links between the social and the ecological as well as widening the notion of justice to include a broader sphere of issues than those that have traditionally been the concern of the left. The current pandemic brings many of these currents together. It is after all an example of a global force – there is nothing more potentially global and destructive than a virus – that is currently met by largely national responses (see Horton, 2020, for an incisive critique). One of the key questions for the future will be the prospect of a more cosmopolitan response, the intimations of which might be seen in the intersection of three struggles that animate the present moment: the public health and medical crisis, the ecological crisis and, as reflected in the BLM movement, social justice.

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## Notes

1. A classic account is de Jouvenel's *The Art of Conjecture*, first published in 1964 (de Jouvenel, 2017 [1964/1967]).
2. On the notion of the radical imaginary, see Castoriadis (1987 [1975]) and more generally on the idea of social imaginaries Taylor (2004). See Adams et al. (2017) for a discussion.
3. See Matthew Rushworth and Franz-Xaver Neubert's research, <https://www.livescience.com/42897-unique-human-brain-region-found.html>, reported in early 2014.
4. In chapter 6, Urry outlined six methods of future research that follow from his perspective on complexity: learning from the past, studying 'failed' futures, developing dystopias, envisaging utopias, extrapolation and scenario-building (see also Urry, 2013).
5. Bryon's poem 'Darkness' (1816) was a response to the eruption of Mount Tamborra in Indonesia the previous year, and an unusually cold summer in Europe and darkness caused by the ash.
6. On Bourdieu as a theorist of social transformation, see Fowler (2020).
7. See the chapter 'Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille' in Sewell (2005: 225).
8. The term designating the alternative right. See Hawley (2016).
9. See for example, Trouillot (2003) on the global transformations that shaped the modern world.
10. O'Mahony (2014) characterized this as a conflict between radical pluralism and techno-conservatism.
11. For example, the support of figures such as Julian Assange for the Alt-Right. See also Snyder (2018).
12. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DarkEnlightenment>. See also <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>
13. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/10/overwhelming-and-terrifying-impact-of-climate-crisis-on-mental-health>
14. See, for example: <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-49298720> and <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/05/anti-natalism-argument-david-benatar-wrong/>
15. See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/may/27/is-the-earth-pancake-flat-among-the-flat-earthers-conspiracy-theories-fake-news>
16. As Jonathan White (2019) notes, emergency governance has also become central to the EU.
17. On the notion of a Great Acceleration, see McNeill and Engelke (2014).

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